DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 066 404 SO 004 340

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TITLE Factors Contributing to the Willingness of Elementary Teachers to Try Selected Classroom Innovations.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 13p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Adoption (Ideas); Changing Attitudes; Diffusion; *Educational Innovation; *Educational Research; Elementary Education; Information Dissemination; *Instructional Innovation; Simulation; *Social Studies

ABSTRACT

Elementary teachers are often unwilling to implement new innovations in their school programs. This research study attempts to explore, through the use of simulation, why this reluctance occurs and to identify relationships of specific variables of teachers' expressed willingness to adopt innovations. Four samples of elementary classroom teachers, totaling 165 drawn from schools in Texas, responded to an instrument which included information and posed questions indicating teacher interest and willingness to use innovations. Three social studies innovations of progressive complexity were described to these teachers, asking them to assume the real life situation of deciding whether to adopt innovative programs. Two strategies employed in the data collection sessions were the "intervention mode", in which group discussion was encouraged, and the "non-intervention mode", with each teacher working alone. Results indicated that the three innovations were not perceived alike; rather, the majority of teachers were less willing to use programs considered to be more involved and demanding. Interest, peer support, and the characteristics of the innovations are also important to teachers in considering adoptions of new programs. This study reflects and supports a growing body of research and theory supporting planning for change to insure success. (Author/SJM)

ED 066404

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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE WILLINGNESS OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS TO TRY SELECTED CLASSROOM INNOVATIONS

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SP 004 340

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Schools today are under pressure to change, to improve, to become more accountable for their output. The virtual explosion of knowledge and wide availability of new educational programs now offer challenging and enticing alternatives to traditional practices. Educators are more and more faced with the responsibility of making decisions relevant to curriculum change.

The chief administrators of the schools, the superintendent, supervisors, and principals, have long been recognized as occupying key roles in facilitating change. However, the position of the teacher as an autonomous person within the classroom has placed significant limitations on the influence of administrators.

The classroom teacher has always been an important curriculum decision-maker. Today, with the emergence of participatory decision making and such organizational structures as team teaching, there is more awareness and full recognition that, as the implementer of the educational program and the daily practitioner of instruction, the classroom teacher is a vital link in the change process. The role of the classroom teacher in the adoption of new programs must be considered crucial.

Instructional supervisors and building principals are frequently cast in the role of change agents. As facilitators

of change, they need techniques for assessing the potential receptivity of a faculty toward a given innovation. In addition, they need to know more about the relationships of various critical factors that may encourage and support the adoption of new instructional programs by teachers.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore in a simulation setting the relationships of specific variables to the classroom teacher's expressed willingness to use selected new educational programs. The focus was on the individual teacher as a member of a social system, her school, and as a decision-maker relative to her own classroom.

PROCEDURE

Four samples of elementary classroom teachers were drawn from schools in Texas. One sample was composed of sixty teachers from ten districts who were attending a human relations workshop, while another was composed of the entire faculty of twenty-nine teachers of one elementary school from a small city district. The remaining samples were composed of the entire elementary classroom faculties of two small districts. One had four elementary campuses, and included fifty-five teachers; the other district included forty teachers from three buildings, two serving agricultural areas and one serving a bedroom community area near a large city. A total of one hundred sixty-five sets of responses were obtained in usable form.

These teachers responded to an instrument which included both information and questions. Three innovations were described. Each was a new social studies curriculum. One was fairly simple, primarily supplementary in nature. The second was considered moderately demanding, while the third was rather complex and required changes of virtually all teachers within a building. Each teacher respondent was asked to assume that she was facing the real life situation of deciding whether to use each of these programs in her classroom. Her responses to a number of questions yielded indications of her interest in each program, her willingness to use each program, her perception of the agreement of each program with reference group norms, the extent of her self-actualization, and her perception of the control structure of her school.

Two strategies were employed in the data collection sessions. In the "intervention mode" group discussion was encouraged as each new program was presented. This was a deliberate attempt to see that the teachers gave fairly close attention to the characteristics of each of the three programs. In the "non-intervention mode" each teacher worked alone and no discussion was permitted until all questionnaires had been collected. It should be noted that the context, or environment, of the local school was not simulated. Rather, it was the program alternatives and the decision making process which were simulated. Each teacher was asked to consider each

program individually in the context of her own school and classroom setting.

RESULTS

Multiple linear regression analysis revealed significant differences ($p < .01$) in teachers' willingness to use each of the three programs described. In addition, there were significant differences in willingness between teachers who were allowed to discuss the innovations during data collection and those who were not permitted such discussion. However, as shown in Table 1, the differences in both data collection modes were inversely related to the complexity of the program.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Significant differences in willingness ($p < .01$) to use each program were also found when teachers were grouped on the basis of grade level taught and faculty assignment. No significant differences were found attributable to age, amount of education, or number of years taught.

Perceived agreement of a program with reference group norms, perception of total amount of control exercised within the school, and expressed interest were found to be statistically significant ($p < .01$) in explaining variance in a teacher's willingness to use a program; however, as shown in Table 2, only expressed interest explained a sufficient amount of

variance to constitute an effective predictor of a teacher's willingness to use a new program.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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No clear relationships were detected regarding high and low self-actualized teachers, and influential and non-influential teachers.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Differences in characteristics of new programs were reflected in the willingness of teachers to use each of the programs. Likewise, differences in school situations were also reflected. Though the trend appeared to be that individual teachers were less willing to use programs considered more involved and demanding, as shown in Table 3, five of the eight faculties departed to some extent from this trend. Two of the faculties indicated their highest mean willingness relative to the most complex program described. Differences in characteristics of new programs were further reflected in the range of differences in mean willingness. The range in faculty willingness for the simplest program was 3.4 to 3.9, while the range for the complex program was 2.6 to 5.0.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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These differences in willingness between faculties may reflect differences in general attitude toward innovation, differences in nature of perceived needs of students, or differences in the perceived compatibility of the innovation with the current program. In any case, it is obvious that the three innovations were not perceived alike. It is probable that if such data were available in real life situations, those responsible for setting up pilot programs would have some indication of faculty receptivity to a specific program. If the simple program described in the simulation were to be placed in one or two schools, almost any school except School 6 might be a good choice. However, if it were the complex program being piloted, School 3 and School 6 would appear to be better choices.

When the teachers were grouped on the basis of the method employed to collect the data, significant differences were found in expressed willingness to use the programs. The mean willingness scores of those teachers who were encouraged to discuss each innovation were lower than those of the teachers who were not permitted such interaction. One interpretation of this is that when teachers have the opportunity to discuss a new program with their fellow teachers, they perceive the advantages and disadvantages of the program more clearly and view their commitments, in terms of time and new skills to be learned, more realistically. This results in more conservative expressions of willingness, especially relative to consideration of a complex program.

On the basis of the findings of this study, it appears that the simulation technique may be a useful one for assessing the potential receptivity of a teacher, or a group of teachers toward specific innovations. Such simulation of the teacher's decision making process should include the opportunity for discussion of each innovation proposed. This discussion is certain to occur in the natural school setting and affect actual implementation, perhaps even more than it did in this study. It may be that unrealistic estimates of receptivity helps to account for the high failure rate of many projects that are initially enthusiastically received.

Of the five factors which were studied in terms of their value for explaining or predicting a teacher's willingness to use a new program, a teacher's expression of interest was by far the most powerful. Though it may be naive to assume that a change agent could effectively select a supportive environment by simply asking if the members of the faculty were interested in a specific innovation, this may deserve further investigation. In the light of much current practice in which teachers are not assessed for readiness or competence at all, such a simple appraisal of interest would at least be an improvement. Perhaps a firm expression of interest actually reflects the other factors studied. For example, if a teacher feels that a new program is not compatible with her school's current program, this is likely to be reflected in her expression of interest, especially if she learns through discussion that many of her peers do not favor the innovation.

The technique used in this study has obvious limitations. First, there was no attempt here to validate the findings in actual practice. Second, the decision making process which was studied here may be different from the decision making process as it occurs in many schools. The teacher who operates within an organizational framework is different from the independent businessman or farmer. Third, the decision making process is most likely just that, a process. The decision-maker undoubtedly makes a series of decisions leading to implementation or rejection; today, she is interested and seeks more information, tomorrow she learns that her team teacher opposes the new idea. Next week she visits another school with her principal and sees the program in operation. Then she talks with a parent who thinks that education should be like it was in the good old days. What is captured at any one point in time is simply a snapshot of the respondent's process, one glimpse into her thinking process.

This study reflects and supports a growing body of research and theory supporting planning for change to insure success. It appears that interest, peer support, and the characteristics of the innovations are important to teachers in considering adoptions of new programs. Further, it appears that faculties vary in their collective receptivity to specific innovations. Commonly assumed factors such as age, experience, and amount of education are not significant.

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Mode of Data Collection	Simple Program	Moderately Demanding Program	Complex Program
Intervention Mode	4.4	4.2	3.2
Non-intervention Mode	4.8	4.5	4.2

Table 1. Mean Willingness of Teachers in Two Modes of Data Collection to Use Each of Three New Programs (N=495)

Predictor Variable	R^2
Perception of total amount of control	.0898
Perception of agreement of program with reference norms group	.1541
Interest in specified program	.7601

Table 2. Amount of Variance in Teachers' Willingness Explained by Each of Three Variables

Faculty	Simple Program	Moderately Demanding Program	Complex Program
School 1	3.9	3.7	3.4
School 2	3.7	4.5	3.8
School 3	3.7	4.6	4.9
School 4	3.8	3.2	2.9
School 5	3.7	4.2	3.3
School 6	3.4	1.9	5.0
School 7	3.7	2.9	2.6
School 8	3.7	3.1	3.6

Table 3. Mean Willingness of Faculties to Use Each of Three New Programs (N=327)